

Embodying Controversy Through Feminist Pedagogy

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Abstract

The papers in this special issue were inspired by a workshop designed to engage with the myriad ways that controversy manifests in feminist pedagogies in post-secondary geography classrooms. Whether early in their careers or more senior, all special issue contributors reflect upon what and how they have been (in)formally taught – as both students and instructors – and learned what to teach, how to teach, and how to connect with other educators about the challenges of engaging with controversy in/as critical pedagogies. This introduction explores how the authors, individually and collectively, offer emotionally informed analyses of their embodied pedagogies and the consequent exclusions and discriminations resulting from them. We explore how the contributors envision ‘world-making’ alternatives within colleges and universities, assuming in some small capacity the responsibility for recreating academic institutions as more socially just. Although it is our goal to use controversy as a lens to disrupt the academic institutions and the systems of oppression upon which they are founded, the imperfectness of

racialization, gender, sexuality, ability, and other axes of difference, as well as by the topic- or issue-based content of our courses” (Laliberté et al. 2017, 36). This workshop involved twenty-three individuals from across Turtle Island (specifically from Canada and the United States). It was envisioned to decenter whiteness and heteronormativity by prioritizing the involvement of Indigenous, racialized, and queer geographers at different career stages to participate in a process of collective knowledge exchange and mentorship to share experiences of working with controversy across institutions and political contexts.

There are many different ways of thinking about controversy – scientific, knowledge, social, religious, and moral for example – but the workshop and the special issue have focused on the social dimensions of controversy. Issues of social exclusion, inequalities, and injustice – whether it be through practices and processes of racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism – are inherently controversial, “particularly when explored through a geographical lens of who gains and who loses, when and where” (Healey 2012, 239). There are also many socially controversial topics that characterize geography in the twenty-first century, helping to continue making the discipline relevant to daily life (George and Williams 2018).

Controversy as it intersects with feminist pedagogy is powerfully synergistic because feminism has long sought to ask new, different, or difficult questions as a way to identify societal injustices and foster material and cultural change towards social equity. However, we teach in a time when there is growing pressure within neoliberalizing post-secondary institutions for us “to facilitate teaching that will lead to ‘real world practical applications’” that are synonymous with the values of corporations and governments and “to avoid engagement with the political on campus” (Huish 2013, 365). Invariably, what is considered controversial by us, our colleagues, and our students is shaped by institutional and regional/national contexts as well as our own personalities, perspectives, and lived experiences. It is also imperative to recognize that using controversy as a critical pedagogical tool is intellectually demanding and emotionally challenging.

On some level, we are all emotionally invested in controversial topics. They provoke us. They anger us. They exhaust us. They silence us. They can also inspire us. These reactions to controversial topics are unevenly felt and distributed, distorted by power differentials and embodied lived experiences, manifesting in some learners exploiting the opportunity of controversy to have a platform to dominate the narrative while others feeling exposed and unsupported by the very framing of an issue as controversial (Bryan et al. 2012; Pryor 2015; Walls and Hall 2018).

In large part, university instructors do not receive much if any pedagogical training (Robinson and Hope 2013), certainly not enough to effectively manage the discussion of controversy on the fly and in the heat of the moment, simultaneously considering pedagogical intent, student emotions and support, and critical (re)framing with anti-oppression priorities all the while being self-aware of their own emotional reactions and personal needs for self-care. Most feminist pedagogy and pedagogical research has focused on traditional face-to-face educational contexts (Chick and Hassel 2009), but online learning environments - particularly those rather suddenly forced by the COVID-19 pandemic - present their own complexities and possibilities, making the mediation of discussion about controversial topics especially challenging in the absence of adequate training and support. Yet these pedagogical challenges should not be individual struggles, but they are often made so by competitive and bureaucratic university structures that isolate and fracture rather than foster pedagogical collaboration (McCusker 2017). Rather than face these pedagogical challenges separately, we know from other feminist projects that it is the collective that makes the most significant, comprehensive, and meaningful change. This special issue is an effort to share some of the work that came out of the workshop with the hope of inspiring more collective action

to support one another, as instructors and learners, in actively and effectively engaging with controversy in post-secondary contexts.

Throughout this collection, the collaborative dimensions of writing are showcased as dynamic processes that are often incomplete and ambiguous. We feel this emphasis is critical given the deeply personal nature of feminist pedagogies, particularly as they intersect with controversy as it is experienced by people “who are always already ‘hyperembodied,’ render[ing] the conventional mode of journal article writing and reasoning inadequate” (Rand 2013, 122). A number of contributions are jointly authored, combining the voices and perspectives of diverse educators. Through these pieces, authors follow in the footsteps of Gale and Wyatt (2017, 255-256) who have provocatively asked “How might collaborative writing take us – and the academy somewhere different? Where might we as a scholarly community take collaborative writing?”. For the feminist² contributors to this collection, collaborative writing has taken the form of letters, a zine, and more traditional co-authored journal articles.

The intentions of this introduction include familiarizing the reader to the themes of the special issue as well as to the alternative forms of expression explored in the pages of this issue. In this introduction, we challenge the linearity of a singular authorial voice by including multiple partial and overlapping voices. There is the standard academic prose, which you are currently reading. There is also a collective voice (**in bold**) that highlights the often-obscured act of writing as an iterative process. In both of these collective voices, we follow Lugone and Spelman (1983, 573) by stating that “we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience. So when we speak in unison it means just that – there are [multiple] voices and not just one”. We have chosen to separate some of Denise B. McLeod’s contributions (*in italics*) as a way of respecting that in collective writing, as in collective action, politics of erasure and marginalization must be actively challenged. For similar reasons, we also identify when we are highlighting Willie Wright’s voice via indentation. The practice of scholarly writing in this special issue is, therefore, approached as a form of critical pedagogy in and of itself. There is certainly much scope for us to push further, to learn from the imaginative provocations of visual, literary, and poetic forms of writing (e.g., Bauch 2010; Brice 2018; de Leeuw 2017).

(We started this conversation knowing that controversy as a pedagogical project was more than simply discussing controversial topics in the classroom. To be able to choose which controversies to engage with is a privilege. How do we talk about that privilege? How do we talk about uneven distributions of academic freedom? Uneven access to spaces of education? How do we talk about all ‘the other stuff’ that informs pedagogy?)

A number of the essays in this collection address the role of embodiment in classrooms and on course instruction. Recognizing that there are many ways of talking about embodiment (Longhurst and Johnston 2014; Detamore 2010), the authors in this collection do not offer a singular definition, but, rather, view bodies as more than mere vessels of identity. Bodies are approached as fleshy materialities that “move physically, but...also move affectively, kinesthetically, imaginatively, collectively, aesthetically, socially, culturally and politically” (McCormack 2008, 1823). To think about pedagogy through embodiment necessitates an intricate and relational understanding of bodies wherein bodies are understood as extending beyond their apparent boundaries to connect with others in ways that can be felt

² Note that the identification of ‘feminist geographer’ is not held by all authors – particularly, Willie Wright (a co-author of this introduction).

and seen (Dixon and Senior 2011). Engaging with this emotional register within embodied pedagogies brings us to an awareness of how emotions are embodied “circuits through which power is felt, imagined, mediated, negotiated and/or contested” (Pedwell 2014, 34). In a teaching environment, how one’s embodiment is perceived by others in the room can have a number of impacts on how a class is taught, what students learn, how students are evaluated, and how students, in turn, may evaluate a course (Eaves 2020; Nast 1999).

In “Pedagogies of Queer and Trans Repair,” DasGupta, Rosenberg, Catungal, and Giesecking (this issue) reflect on the controversies of gender and sexuality in their classes, with a particular focus on the impacts of their own embodied presentations and performances of gender and sexuality. DasGupta et al. complicate these narratives further by discussing pain management and embodied disability in the classroom to open up a conversation about the pedagogical implications of how and when to disclose the in/visible aspects of embodied experiences. While such disclosures can generate moments of solidarity in the face of systemic and institutional discrimination, it is necessary to acknowledge that disability disclosures are confounded by the intersectionality of identities and “that the risk-taking that accompanies disclosure is not experienced equally or in the same ways by all people” (Kerschbaum et al. 2017, 1-2). Challenging the mind-body duality that infiltrates society and the spaces of academia, the authors write “the body in the classroom is always questioned in the space that exudes the life of the mind” (p. 495).

Through vignettes that capture physical moments, DasGupta, Rosenberg, Catungal, and Giesecking offer insights into the experiences of being hyper-aware of their hyper-visibility in front of students. Inhabiting interstitial spaces and intersectional embodiments, say DasGupta et al. has allowed them to circumvent students’ marginalizing comments often aimed at the attire of cis-female professors. The authors are clear, however, that their controversial bodies do not afford them the deference relegated for cis-gender, white male professors. This lack of deference, lack of comfort, is similarly noted by Willie Wright, one of the authors of this introduction. We take a moment, therefore, to shift from our collective voice to allow Wright to describe his experience teaching at a predominately white institution in the Deep South, where his presence as a jointly appointed Black professor in Geography and African American Studies elicits various reactions from students. He responds to these reactions with course-specific pedagogical tools. Says Wright,

In the World Regional Geography course my body was primed, always expecting a challenge from the young white men in class. However, in my African American Studies course my anxiety stemmed from my lack of experience with teaching, not from the threat of white privilege. In fact, my students’ bodies brought an instantaneous comfort. I venture to say my embodiment did similarly for a number of my students, many of whom had never had a Black educator, no less a Black male professor. I related to the majority Black class experientially and intimately. The jokes I made before them landed as that – jokes. Also, I gauged that I could talk to and discipline some of my Black students as if they were my own. For, in some way, they were.

Hypervisibility and invisibility experienced by queer and people of color scholars is experienced in post-secondary contexts (c.f., Settles et al. 2019; Basu this issue) and beyond (c.f., Haritaworn et al. 2018; Thomsen 2016). At times, misrecognition occurs around one’s colleagues, some of whom, like one’s students, know not what to make of the combination of one’s embodied aesthetics, one’s gender, and one’s sonic register. In her work on this subject, Story (2017) places hypervisibility and invisibility as part of her everyday experiences as a Black queer femme professor. Depending on her audience (e.g., university colleagues or members of the queer community), she is spectacle or aberration. In either instance, her identity is partially acknowledged. As the authors in this collection state, each

misrecognition occurs as an “everyday lapse” (Arun-Pina this issue) or the “absence of recognition” (DasGupta, Rosenberg, Catungal and Giesecking this issue). For Arun-Pina, though the “continued misgendering by faculty, staff, and students” that has characterized their graduate career is painful and disrespectful, they see “trans-pedagogy” as having the potential to unravel some of society’s binaries. Similarly, Eaves (this issue) makes explicit the role of embodied controversial pedagogies “to dismantle the structures that do not accommodate my own body, much less other bodies, in normative ways”.

What is apparent from these contributions is that, over the course of a semester or a quarter, “the ways we feel about each other, our relationships – physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual – are pedagogical material used in the processes of teaching and of learning and in the materialised pedagogical relationship” (Dixon and Senior 2011, 477). Despite our *a priori* attempts to imagine and structure courses through the design of syllabi, the relational dynamics of the classroom cannot be predicted and shift in response to our embodied materialities and encounters (both in person and mediated online through screens (Longhurst 2017)). This requires some instructors to develop rhetorical, comical, affective, and defensive strategies to anticipate, mitigate, and utilize challenges from students for whom having a non-normative body in a position of knowledge and authority is an abnormality. That said, the role of embodiment in creating controversy, as controversy, or as lacking in controversy is best summed up in a remark by DasGupta, Rosenberg, Catungal and Giesecking (this issue); “There is my body, teaching geography” (6).

(But we can’t leave it at the scale of the body. We don’t want to fall into the trap of individualizing everything. How do we move beyond that - in and through it? How do we weave in the politics of place? How do we overtly engage the political provocations of the ‘troubled times’ in which we are living?)

We can’t talk about our work of teaching without talking about our working conditions, and I am exhausted by the work I am expected and required to do. And the work overload of academia being considered ‘the norm’ with the additional expectation of myself, as a cis-gender fem queer Indigenous woman, I am expected to do the emotional labour of helping students understand the content that I teach, challenging the structural oppressions that academia was founded on, as well as supporting colleagues and students who are experiencing similar oppressions to my own.

Administrators silently rely on the unequal distribution of labour – in its many physical, emotional, and spiritual forms – where the most privileged, such as white, cis-gender men, are not required or expected to do the same amount of invisibilized labour (e.g., care work, anti-oppressive mentoring, and the stress of precarity) as those from historically marginalized groups (Ivancheva et al. 2019; Maddrell et al. 2019; Mountz et al. 2015; Mullings and Mukherjee 2018). This exacerbates the inequitable labour amongst academics, particularly those who are gendered and racialized and leads to a situation in which some individuals are systemically over-worked (Igloliorte et al. 2017). These workplace silences persist as students and instructors alike struggle to keep their heads above water. Academia’s structural norms, such as creating competition for promotions and merit pay, create a facade of equity (Strauss 2019). In reality, it is a system built on racial capitalism (Robinson 2000) that reinforces the stifling of specific voices and the erection of barriers to professional advancement.

We often hide our deeper thoughts, feelings, and concerns regarding the academic spaces in which we participate for fear of reprisals including professional sabotage. So

much goes unspoken simply because it is 'easier.' But I get tired of not saying things. And I get tired of having to be the one saying things and then being labelled as 'difficult.'

This special issue prioritizes people working individually and collectively to challenge institutional norms – purposefully choosing to be ‘difficult’ or as Sara Ahmed (2017) would say “being Killjoys.” From the labour strike at York University to the anti-racist protests at the University of North Carolina (UNC) to the open letter to the Department of Geography at York University, we see the controversies of being ‘difficult’ emerge in challenges to neoliberal labour policies, white supremacist institutions, and transphobic practices. Each of these examples demonstrates the displacement of the classroom as the centre of learning. During such shifts, students become educators. In the essay by FLOCK (Feminists Liberating Our Collective Knowledge), the authors acknowledge the generations of student organizers who informed administrators of UNC’s past and present relationship to white supremacy and chattel slavery. Using the direct protest of Maya Little, a doctoral student in the Department of History as an example of embodied pedagogy, FLOCK (this issue) state “embodying the labor of historical contextualization that the administration had thus far refused, Maya’s intervention was an act of pedagogy that built on the strategies of previous generations of student visionaries who struggled for a more just university. These pedagogical acts were meant for the administration, faculty, the fellow students, and the general public” (p. 532).

(How do we acknowledge the emotional labour that is so stifling, yet also acknowledge the feelings of support and belonging that can be created in collective action? How do we fully engage with these experiences?)

I work in a faculty of 10 instructors who the administration labels as ‘angry,’ ‘difficult’ and ‘trouble-makers’ that the administration would prefer to be quiet, but there are senior faculty members who have used their job security and privilege to advocate for change within the institution and create a space where we can confront intersectional oppression, gender-based violence, and systemic barriers - confront them, not just theorize them. When I’m in the faculty office, it feels safe in a way that the halls of the institution do not. I am able to speak my mind in a more authentic way in that space. While my colleagues are aware of my Indigeneity, it is not expected or demanded that I perform for them.

Despite the prevalence of violence throughout our lives in the institutions of academia, there are points in this special issue that highlight the creation of inclusive and/or supportive spaces of care and inspiration. Wright describes some of his classes as a sanctuary – a space in which he could relate to the majority Black class experientially and intimately. As mentioned above, in his World Regional Geography course (with predominantly white students) his Black body represented controversy, whereas in Introduction to the African American Experience it was a refuge. The feeling of refuge and support is also evident in the letters shared between authors in this issue. In “Letters from A Queer Classroom: Reflections on Gender, Sexuality, and Pedagogy,” the authors’ opening salutations and closing remarks speak of love, care, and consideration – to each other and to the territories upon which they are living. The authors close the collection with the words, “Yours in love, glitter, work, becoming, and disruption.”

More generally, this special issue is inspired by the ways in which this anti-oppression care work is becoming more visible in the discipline of Geography. In North America, at least, sessions in 2019 at the Canadian Association of Geographers (e.g. Pedagogies as Resistance: Teaching Geography in/during

Troubled Times) brought together a series of pedagogical workshops and sessions that addressed teaching pedagogies of resistance in human and physical geography. A new specialty group has been created at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) on the critical geographies of education which sponsored sessions on decolonial learning and teaching, school spaces, movements, the production of space, and engaged learning. The Harassment-Free AAG was initiated in 2019 in an effort to make the AAG a safer space for working, learning, and sharing. Beyond these formal institutions, the collective production, sharing, and teaching of and from the Black Geographies Reading List (discussed in Eaves' conclusion to this special issue) also speaks to a change in the 'commemorative bodies' that canonize particular spatial values and knowledges in the discipline of Geography. Furthermore, we are all inspired by people and political efforts where we live – from working with Indigenous leaders to activists of color to our students and colleagues, we do not work in isolation, although sometimes our institutions make us feel that we do.

(Even as we build coalitions, see change, feel hope – we are given pause by the question of how we relate to one another when the voices of some are so muted and *silenced*.³ It is a question we grappled with but could not answer during the workshop, and it is a question that we continue to struggle with (we hope productively) in this special issue.)

Controversy also lives in the things that are left unsaid or the lived experiences that get erased or aren't validated because others don't share those experiences. Even though we all share the privilege of being academics, there are lots of layers of our experiences that get lost. But when we do talk about it, it gets difficult.

Integral to the embodied nature of controversy is the role of silence. How we speak to and interact with each other matters – as scholars, as instructors, as students, as mentors, and as mentees. There are a diverse range of politics embedded in how we perform our communications – the modes we use, the tones we take, the things left unsaid and unchallenged. While silencing can be an act of violence, silence can also be a multifaceted and multi-sited force for creating spaces of dissent (Ranjbar, 2017; Sapon-Shevin 2004). The embodied nature of controversy pedagogically leads us into this landscape of complex silences and imperfect communications.

Attentive to these silences, we also wish to acknowledge, as Denise B. McLeod points to above, that we are all, as academics, in positions of privilege. This special issue is designed by and for those involved in post-secondary education, but academia does not exist in a vacuum. We are embedded in communities that experience the uneven distribution of violences from systems such as racial capitalism, settler colonialism, ableism, and heteropatriarchy. At the moment, COVID-19 is making the embodied effects of these uneven distributions of violence and vulnerability palpable (Laster Pirtle 2020). No matter how much violence and marginalization we may experience as academics, our bodies tend not to be those that bear the brunt of this pandemic. Attention to the silences in our conversations forces us to do more than just acknowledge the privilege of our situations; it challenges us to take action.

Although the goal of this special issue is to use controversy as a lens through which to disrupt academic institutions and the systems of oppression upon which they are founded – to challenge students, instructors, administrators, and ourselves to take action – it is very apparent

³ This question was posed by Ranu Basu during earlier work on this special issue.

that even when we focus only within academia, or even exclusively at the 2018 workshop, particular voices are missing from this process of disruption. These silences are profound and loud. So too, are the imperfections of our disruption, both in the originating workshop and in the construction of this special issue. A result of this limitation is that there are many voices missing from this special issue that represent important intersections between historically marginalized communities and their experiences of controversy in and through post-secondary education. For a range of reasons, only twelve authors of the original twenty-three workshop participants chose to contribute to this special issue. Some of these abstentions were due to fundamental opposition to the very framing of the project itself - from the dearth of black and Indigenous scholars in the room⁴ to the focus on pedagogy, which was seen as a distraction for early career faculty who are primarily evaluated by research contributions.

Both of these issues speak to the systemic inequalities in the distribution of academic labour which inform career choices and publishing priorities. Nearly a decade following the inaugural meeting of the Great Lakes Feminist Collective, women of color faculty, again choose, despite making key insights into our in-person gathering, “to make strategic individual choices to invest their time and energy elsewhere in order to survive within their departments and the academy” (Laliberte et al. 2017, 41). Thus, despite attempts to make the gathering and the publication process more inclusive and less labour intensive, the demands of university and department-level⁵ metrics and measurements continue to impede the production of critical collective scholarship. After reflecting upon these ongoing omissions, we discovered that the barriers were not only institutional barriers, but political. It was not lost on Laliberte and Bain, two white women who were the two primary organizers of the workshop, that despite our desires to create a more inclusive intellectual space, perhaps in the future, we (and our contemporaries) might direct our experience and expertise - in word and deed - to supporting the formation of all Indigenous, all Black, and all people of color (POC) conferences and workshops. This support may look like offering financial support from individual and department research accounts, name recognition, the technical writing skills required to draft and attain competitive funding, and the logistical aid needed to coordinate such gatherings. As Indigenous, Black, and Latinx geographies grow alongside the number of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx geographers and specialty groups (and the number of POC non-geographers engaging with these subfields), the need for racially, ethnically, and analytically specific gatherings, so too, will grow.⁶

Since the workshop convened, controversial events shifted politics and pedagogy around the world - particularly COVID and the ever-growing movement for Black lives. This pandemic and movement have made evident how vulnerabilities are produced through intersecting systems of oppression. And that these interstitial systems are inherently geographic. These events have brought an international spotlight to Black and Indigenous communities and how they are

⁴ Of the twenty-three participants, only two identified as Black and two as Indigenous.

⁵ We worry that all too often the term “neoliberal university” obscures the actual decision-making power of departments in weighing the work of their colleagues. If (senior) faculty were more amenable to the merits of varied scholarly productions (e.g. collective, public, etc.), more staunch challenges could be posed against the traditional demands of tenure committees at the university level.

⁶ We are thinking, in the main, of the 2018 workshop, “Anti-Blackness in the American Metropolis,” hosted by Drs. Willie Wright, Adam Bledsoe, and Yousuf Al-Bulushi as well as the 2017 and 2020 symposiums facilitated by the Berkeley Geographies project at the University of California Berkeley. Other such gatherings are, for sure, on the horizon.

disproportionately affected by state violence, both direct (police brutality) and indirect (lack of sufficient access to healthcare), but the essays in this volume remind us that direct and indirect racism are not new to academia. The responsibility for radical change is not solely that of scholars of color; white, tenured, and otherwise privileged scholars must build on the momentum of this moment to create more spaces that support scholars of color and venues that amplify their voices. Pedagogies of controversy are a way to disrupt the geographic canon and re-inform the ways geography is taught in undergraduate and graduate courses.

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